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Phenomenology and Non-Conceptual Content

Book review of Schear, J. K. (ed.), *Mind, Reason, and Being-in-the-World: The McDowell-Dreyfus Debate*, Routledge, London-New York 2013, 350 pp.

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*The McDowell-Dreyfus Debate*¹ presents what is likely to be the most complete overview of phenomenology's partake in debates over non-conceptual content up to date. As the title indicates, the chapters of all fifteen contributors center around McDowell's conceptualist position, which was first exposed in detail in the already highly influential work *Mind and World*². Here McDowell argues against any form of non-conceptual content, a move motivated primarily by what Sellars³ had dubbed the "Myth of the Given". On McDowell's (and Sellars's) understanding, characteristic of Modern philosophy is an ontological separation of two realms of being. Whereas one is that of external reality, supposedly governed by natural law, the other is that of human action and free spontaneity. The Modernist sees man's place in reality in accord with this: whereas the senses receive information from the external environment which causally impinges upon the senses, our complex thoughts ultimately have to relate back to these bare data. This makes the function of sensations ambiguously two-legged: whereas one has a foothold in thought, the other has a grip in the natural world. The idea that bare sense data bridge the realm of causal nature to thought and thus have an epistemic effect upon our beliefs is what Sellars called the Myth of the Given. For twentieth century philosophers such as Sellars and Davidson⁴, the price for this image is too high, and consequently they deny that the bare Givens our bodies receive from the external world are epistemologically efficacious. However, according to

1 SCHEAR 2013.

2 MCDOWELL 1994.

3 SELLARS 1963.

4 DAVIDSON 1984 [1974].

McDowell, both these thinkers still cling onto the traditional notion of bare sense data too much, which is undesirably reminiscent of Modern epistemology. McDowell himself presents another solution: if we want to think of thoughts as bearing onto reality, we should conceive of intuition and sensation as already conceptually structured, to the extent that nothing enters experience that is not already “saddled” with concepts. This way, our concepts and beliefs can still be said to touch upon the world that we sense and perceive, but without having to invoke a non-conceptual Given to do the job.

McDowell’s conceptualism thus serves the primary purpose of clarifying the relation between mind and world in the light of certain epistemological concerns. The main issue is the justificatory relation between representations provided by intuition and the beliefs we can have about the world. By conceiving of the contents of intuition as conceptual rather than as bare Givens, McDowell thinks it is easier to understand how a perception could give one a reason to belief that something is or is not the case. My perception of, say, the cup of coffee in front of me, gives me a reason to belief that there is a cup of coffee in front of me. By consistently claiming that all intuition is “saddled” with concepts – thus that the content of my perception of the cup of coffee is already conceptual – McDowell wishes both to clarify how intuition provides reasons for belief as well as to avoid having to appeal to a Given. This “saddledness” of intuition is then explained by appeal to second nature: human beings are said to engage in a process of cultural development from their birth onwards by which they attain conceptual knowledge that henceforth comes to structure experience independently of the agent’s deliberate actions.

In spite of the fact that his concerns in *Mind and World* are mostly epistemological, McDowell has had a notable influence on philosophers of mind and also on phenomenologists interested in bridging phenomenology to other areas of scholarly research. *The McDowell-Dreyfus Debate* belongs to this latter field. It wishes to explore what phenomenologists may contribute to ongoing debates on non-conceptual content, with a special focus on the phenomenology of skillful coping. Generally speaking, many phenomenologists have expressed their concerns about McDowell’s exclusion of non-conceptual content. Often, they feel that the conceptualist thesis wrongly assesses human behavior as a thoroughly rational activity.

The McDowell-Dreyfus Debate opens with Dreyfus’s critical reading of McDowell’s rejection of non-conceptual content, which is supposed to constitute the backbone of the debates throughout the book. His criticisms, as does the rest of the book by and large, essentially evolves the question of over-intellectualization: does McDowell’s conceptualism falsely present human

experience as governed entirely by concepts and rationality? Dreyfus's response is "yes", an answer for which I take him to provide two arguments. For the first, he draws mostly on examples of absorbed coping in the works of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty. For instance, the early sections of *Being and Time*, where Heidegger analyzes the appearing of the world in its ready-to-handness, seem to inspire Dreyfus in that they reveal a mode of human experience not mediated by concepts. We do not have to think about the door in order to use it to leave the room. «Once a skill is acquired», Dreyfus writes, «concepts used in learning the skill need play no further role» (p. 18). A bit further on (p. 21), Dreyfus chooses to characterize such skillful copings as non-conceptual. The reason for this is the specific nature of these acts, which are characterized by a kind of absorption unknown to conceptual apprehensions. Dreyfus's second argument has essentially the same structure as the first, only this time he focuses on situated normativity (pp. 23-27). To know one's distance from someone else in an elevator and to behave appropriately according to that knowledge does not demand any concepts being put into play. As before, the argument is that conceptual content rests on a kind of intentionality that is not found in skillful coping. One consequence to be drawn from this, as Schear more explicitly does (pp. 294-299), is that McDowell over-intellectualizes human experience. By assuming that all experience is based on a kind of Brentanean/early Husserlian intentionality, McDowell cannot do justice to the phenomenology of absorbed coping.

Dreyfus's motives are existential-phenomenological: he wants to show that we do not need concepts to bridge mind and world, as McDowell has it. For as Heidegger's analyses of worldhood show, and likewise Merleau-Ponty's rich examples of bodily intentionality, these elements are never distinct to start with. Although this perspective is certainly understandable, Dreyfus's main arguments miss their targets, and this has not gone unnoticed by all of the other authors. Schear (pp. 285-302) is the only one who, toward the end of the book, attempts to save the largest part of Dreyfus's non-conceptualist reading. Schear lines up with Dreyfus in asserting that skillful coping constitutes an important exception to the conceptualist rule and that it cannot be appropriated in McDowell's framework. This is the syllogism that is supposed to provide the non-conceptualist's argument:

- (1) The capacity for rationality requires the presence of determinate objects.
- (2) The merging character of absorbed coping precludes the presence of determinate objects.
- (3) Absorbed coping is thus not available to the capacity for rationality.

(4) Therefore, it is not the case that human beings are essentially rational in the strong sense. (p. 294)

But the argument is bound to fail. The reason for this is that both Schear and Dreyfus wrongly assume that claim (1) is endorsed by McDowell, while it clearly is not – something Crane, Noë and McDowell himself had already pointed out earlier in the book. The conceptual capacities McDowell believes are involved in all experience does not demand that determinate objects stand over against a subject, as claim (1) suggests. McDowell would accept that I do not have to conceptualize a basketball that I am trying to catch in order to successfully catch it. His point is that concepts are *passively* drawn upon in skillful coping rather than being actively employed. Catching a basketball, like using a doorknob, is an absorbed action that cannot be performed without the relevant background knowledge having been developed by a process of *Bildung* or cultural development. Although I do not need to actively think that this is a basketball, every aspect of me catching it, including that I am doing it on a basketball field in a city's park in a sports outfit, is entrenched with rationality. The (true) claim that absorbed coping knows no fully determinate objects is, therefore, irrelevant to McDowell's position. Whatever we name the indeterminate objects that do play a part here, it would have been entirely impossible for them to appear the way they do were they not invested with second nature.

Dreyfus is completely consistent in saying that absorbed copings are not conceptual if he takes that to mean that they do not require a subject thematizing an object. But McDowell never denied this. The kind of conceptual involvement McDowell has in mind can do perfect justice to the phenomenology of absorbed coping, for it does not rely on a kind of subject/object distinction characteristic of a propositional attitude. Although, as Crane (p. 230) rightly remarks, McDowell still speaks of the propositional content of intuition in *Mind and World* – a claim he would later drop under pressure of Travis⁵ – I think it is unlikely that McDowell at any point believed such an intentional stance to be necessary for his conceptualism. Already in *Mind and World*, the idea was that «the relevant conceptual capacities are drawn on in receptivity»⁶, which means that they are passive, rather than actively executed by the subject.

Dreyfus's critical argument from absorbed coping is rejected not only by McDowell (pp. 41-56) but also by his fellow phenomenologists Noë (pp. 178-

5 TRAVIS 2004.

6 McDOWELL 1994, p. 9.

182) and Crane (p. 230). Noë thinks phenomenology is supportive of conceptualism, saying that «there is no such thing as how things look independently of the larger context of thought, feeling and interests» (p. 189) and also that «experience is itself a kind of thought» (p. 180). But Noë does not think that these descriptions are incompatible with the general direction into which Dreyfus is moving. Dreyfus's arguments from absorbed coping do not contradict the idea that our intellectual capacities structure the environment and the practices in which we passively engage.

Rouse (pp. 250-267) has a particularly fruitful way of articulating the misunderstanding that obtains between Dreyfus and McDowell. As I stipulated already at the opening of this paper, McDowell's lead motives for favoring conceptualism have little to do with giving a proper descriptive-phenomenological account of mental content. Rouse to my mind correctly asserts that whereas McDowell is interested in a *normative* account of mental content, Dreyfus focuses solely on *description*. This helps explain their different stances. For McDowell, to play a game of basketball must be to passively employ relevant concepts, for it is impossible for a non-cultivated animal to play this game. For Dreyfus, on the other hand, to play basketball is to «become one with» a «phenomenal field» (p. 17): it is a skillful action that lacks the subject/object distance suitable to describe conceptual activities with. Both accounts need not be incompatible. Dreyfus and McDowell may agree both on the descriptive as well as on the normative aspects, as long as both are neatly separated. Basically, then, although Rouse does not put it that way, the McDowell/Dreyfus-Debate would be largely the result of a misunderstanding on Dreyfus's behalf.

Whether this is indeed the case or not, it deserves emphasis that *The McDowell/Dreyfus-Debate* contains a wide variety of interesting viewpoints concerning the relation between phenomenology and non-conceptual content, with both contemporary analytic and historical assessments (Taylor, pp. 61-90; Pippin, pp. 91-109; Gardner, pp. 110-142; Braver 143-162). A great deal of the more analytically oriented chapters, such as those by Noë (pp. 178-193), Siewert (pp. 194-226), Crane (pp. 229-249) and Schellenberg (pp. 272-282) make valuable readings for anyone interested in either phenomenology or philosophy of mind. Crane and Zahavi (pp. 320-343) also briefly touch upon the issues of representationalism and intentionalism, which constitute other sub-fields of contemporary philosophy of mind to which phenomenology might still have a lot to contribute.

All in all, *The McDowell-Dreyfus Debate* presents a collection of papers by outstanding phenomenological philosophers which doubtlessly succeeds in

deepening ongoing debates. In spite of this, however, one cannot help but feeling slightly disappointed by the way the book has been set up around the opening debate. Apart from the central misunderstanding, it is, I think, far from obvious that McDowell is the right philosopher to start a phenomenological debate about non-conceptual content with. Hardly any of the phenomenological contributors to the book focus on those philosophical problems in the light of which McDowell discusses conceptualism. It would have been interesting to see these outstanding philosophers engage with other recent work as well, especially more empirically and psychologically oriented literature. A second potential though perhaps minor setback for any reader is that Husserl's phenomenological work is more or less excluded from these discussions. It is still an open question what Husserl has to offer to contemporary debates over non-conceptual content, and possibly an important one as well, given that Husserl's phenomenological approach is undoubtedly more systematic than that of Heidegger or Merleau-Ponty. Also, certain genetic phenomenological notions such as "types", "habitualization" and "secondary passivity" bear obvious resemblances with McDowellian ideas like second nature. In spite of these concerns, one may consider *The McDowell-Dreyfus Debate* obliged literature for anyone interested in the crossover between phenomenology and philosophy of mind.

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